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Fire Blight Epidemic in Pear Orchards in Northern Israel

Report Categories:

Agricultural Situation

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Report Highlights:

Between 40%-50% of the expected pear harvest has been destroyed by an outbreak of Fire Blight disease last winter. The damage is estimated at NIS100 million. The disease became an epidemic this year due to a combination of reasons. Ministry of Agriculture and the Custom Authority are expected to allow increased imports of tax free pears. Post alerted importers and urged them to submit a request to Ministry of Agriculture for an increased quota of pears for the coming import season.

General Information:

Between 40% - 50% of the expected pear harvest has been destroyed by an outbreak of Fire Blight disease last winter. Most pear orchards throughout Israel were affected by the disease with most damage occurring in the north. The damage is estimated at NIS100 million.

Pear planted area totaled 1,100 hectares mainly in the Upper Galilee and the Golan. The multi annual harvest from this area totals approximately 30– 32 thousand metric tons (tmt), valued at NIS 200 – 240 million (in retail price terms). The common bactericide used for many years against the Fire Blight was the “Sterner” (Oxolimic Acid). Use of other antibiotics (mainly human, of the Streptomycin family) were found to be effective against blight, but are forbidden by the Plant Protection and Inspection Services (PPIS) in Israel.

The disease turned into an epidemic this year as a result of a combination of reasons:

1. A warm winter caused early blossom,
2. Favorable conditions aided the development of the bacteria,
3. Water shortages decreased the trees immunity,
4. The effectiveness of Sterner was destroyed due to increased immunity of the bacteria.
5. The PPIS ban on using alternative antibiotics and the lack of other effective bactericides.

Aside from the next harvest, the epidemic also affected the trees. Farmers were forced to implement “deep cutting” of the affected branches and even uproot approximately 10 – 15 percent of the trees in the worst affected areas. The forecast is for a 40–50 percent decrease in the 2010 harvest and a 10–15 percent decrease in the next few years. In response to a request from the Farmers Union, the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) is considering declaring the Fire Blight outbreak a natural disaster. This will enable government assistance to the farmers.

As a result of the significant decrease in the local harvest and in order to avoid steep price increases, MOA and the Custom Authority are expected to allow increased imports of tax free pears. After discussing the issue with MOA, Post alerted importers and urged them to submit a request to MOA for an increased quota of pears for the coming import season. The importers have done so and are waiting for MOA’s reply.